Introduction
"Who Wants to Live Forever" is a song by the British rock band Queen. It is the sixth track on the album A Kind of Magic and was released in June 1986. The song was written by lead guitarist Brian May for the soundtrack to the film Highlander. The song is used to frame the scenes in the film where Connor MacLeod must endure his beloved wife Heather MacLeod growing old and dying while he, as an Immortal, remains forever young. Brian May wrote the song in the backseat of his car after seeing a 20-minute first cut of the scene of Heather's death.

Here are the lyrics…

[Verse 1] There's no time for us; There's no place for us
What is this thing that builds our dreams yet slips away from us
Who wants to live forever? Who wants to live forever?
There's no chance for us; It's all decided for us
This world has only one sweet moment set aside for us
Who wants to live forever? Who wants to live forever?
Who dares to love forever? When love must die

[Verse 2] But touch my tears with your lips; Touch my world with your fingertips
And we can have forever; And we can love forever; Forever is our today
Who wants to live forever? Who wants to live forever? Forever is our today
Who waits forever anyway? Who wants to live forever? Who wants to live forever?
Forever is our today Who lives forever anyway?

Living forever is the stuff of music and stories, novels, movies, and fairytales. Usually the one who wants to live forever – and achieves immortality – is saddened by decades and even centuries of loss and finally, in the end, longs for death as sweet relief.

And yet, eternal life, everlasting life, is something we still seem too long for… something we desire… and something God has promised us when we follow Jesus deliberately and intentionally. In our text today Jesus continues to teach and talk with his friends in the synagogue and afterward about eating and drinking his body and his blood and about how this translates into eternal life. Let’s explore the text and try to understand what all of this means for us. Turn to John, chapter 6, and beginning with verse 56…

Scripture
Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum saying…

56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.
57 Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

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1 https://genius.com/Queen-who-wants-to-live-forever-lyrics
This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are Spirit and life.

Yet there are some of you who do not believe…’ [For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him]. He went on to say, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.’ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.’ Then Jesus replied, ‘Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is an accuser!’ (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)

Sermon
What Jesus just taught in the synagogue and continued to take about with his friends and the twelve was so different from what they expected to hear from – different really than anything else they had ever heard. Jesus had poked a hole in their world-view and they didn’t want to think about, much less keep talking about it. So they grumbled about it just as their ancestors grumbled about life in the wilderness centuries before during the Exodus when God fed them with manna from heaven instead of with food they were used too. And remember, these folks had recently been fed by Jesus and then had followed him across the lake to ask for more food at the beginning of this whole conversation.

This new teaching was “difficult” in the sense that it was demanding – not just to get your mind round it but to get your heart and soul into it. For anyone brought up in one of the varieties of first-century Judaism, all that Jesus had said was demanding in every sense, but most particularly in that, whereas they might have been prepared to follow a prophet like Moses, or a would-be Messiah, as long as such a person kept within the bounds of the agendas and aspirations they had had in mind, the thought of someone who would speak as Jesus had spoken was too much.

So there was a division among Jesus followers. It looks as though the majority turned away, refusing to go with him any longer. The Twelve stayed, and there is evidence that others did too because by the time he gets to Jerusalem there is a group much larger than just the Twelve with him. I can imagine that many who stayed didn’t completely understand, but they weren’t repelled either. But many turned away.

As I mentioned before, there are streams of faith today that refuse to teach from the John’s Gospel in the same way that they teach from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and
Luke. But to understand the teaching in John 6 (and because as Baptist we do not allow ourselves to throw away any part of the scriptures) we must keep our minds open to the possibility that Jesus, in addition to teaching in the way described in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, might also have given this sort of in-depth and challenging teaching to his followers.

*Tom Wright, a well-know New Testament scholar, says that he has notice a prejudice against taking John historically that sees to go very closely with moves within Western culture to think of religion as a purely spiritual thing. He says we’re told it doesn’t matter if these things written in John happened or not, whether they were said or not; what matters is the spiritual truth that they are teaching. That sounds fine; but it can’t be what John was meaning. This whole discourse, and indeed the whole gospel of John, are about the Word becoming flesh; not the Word becoming an idea, a spirituality, a feeling, or an experience. John may be writing something like history or he may not; but part of what he is trying to tell us is that history – the actual story of Jesus – matters.

At the same time, the explanation Jesus for gives for how the whole thing fits together is expressed by mentioning two things: the ascension of Jesus and the Spirit. Verses 61-63... 61 Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, ‘Does this offend you? 62 Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! 63 The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are Spirit and life. These verses are the keys to understanding this text.

The mention of the ascension of the Son of Man is designed to say: maybe you need to come to terms with the fact that the one you are now dealing with is equally at home in heaven and on earth. He is a citizen of both. He is, after all, the Word made flesh. If that is so, it makes sense to suppose that this flesh, and this blood, is somehow vehicles of the inner life of the Word. The flesh by itself would be irrelevant as verse 63 says. But when the flesh is indwelt b the life of God, of the Word who is God, it makes sense to speak of it in the way Jesus has just done. Though the ascension as an event remains mysterious in John’s gospel it is clearly important for John to affirm that Jesus’ body, not just his “spiritual” life, was and remains the place where the Word took up permanent residence.

There is more Jesus will say in the rest of John’s gospel, but here he is warning against a purely physical interpretation of his words about eating and drinking. Jesus is urging his hearers, just as he has been doing all along, to go beyond a one-dimensional understanding of what he is doing and saying and to break through to listen to the Word within the flesh. For this, they will need the Holy Spirit to help them.

The Twelve remain. They are prepared to say out loud that Jesus is God’s holy one, God’s Messiah. They seem to grasp, at least in a small way, that Jesus is the one who is not only speaking about God’s new age, the age to come, but is, by his words, already bringing it into existence. Peter declared, “Where else could we go? You are the one who’s got the words of eternal life.”
Jesus knows that one of them will turn traitor and become his accuser. But for the moment, the Twelve stand as representatives of the faith, the belief, that Jesus has been looking for: the recognition that in him, his words and his deed, Israel’s God was at last bringing into being the new Exodus, the great movement that would set the whole world free from sin and death.**2 And we are a part of that great Exodus…

Jesus is present with us always. We share communion together regularly to remind ourselves of his presence and to revel in it. The very notion of presence and us living in the presence of God is inherently and necessarily relational and also somehow embodied in the remembrance meal with share. Note that Jesus did not say “Think about this,” “Prove this,” “Look at this,” “Carry this around,” and, surely not, “Argue about this.” Jesus just said, “Eat this . . . and drink all of you” (Matthew 26:26-27). As Augustine (354-430) would preach later, the message is that you are what you eat and drink! Augustine’s message to the newly baptized is often translated as “Be what you see, and receive what you are.”

So the take away here is realizing that we are really the ones learning how to be present – present to ourselves, living in the moment, and present with God living the with-God life. The Lord’s Supper isn’t a magic act to be believed instead but rather a personal transformation to be experienced. When you and I are really present, we experience the Real Presence of God for ourselves.

Communion is an encounter of the heart, where we experience God’s Presence through making ourselves present to God and to one another. In the meal, we move beyond mere words or rational thought and go to that place where we don’t talk about the Mystery; we begin to chew on it.

And here is the best part…

As we gather for worship, as we pray and sing and learn together, as we wrestle with the hard stuff and learn to live together present with one another and with God and as we keep eating and drinking the Mystery… One day it dawns on us, most likely unexpectedly, “My God, I really am what I eat!”

From then on we can trust and allow what has been true since the first moment of our existence:

We are the very Body of Christ.

We have dignity and power flowing through us in our naked existence—and everybody else does too, even though most of us do not know it.

This is enough to guide and empower our entire faith journey.

And “living forever” – eternal life… everlasting life…

Well, that just becomes the icing on the cake!

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3 Richard Rohr, Real Presence, Tuesday, July 24, 2018
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